Research Article

Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad

Volume 38, Issue 1, pp. 67-100
DOI: 10.36366/frontiers.v38i1.985
www.frontiersjournal.org

Assessing intercultural learning in study abroad: An authentic, aligned approach for better outcomes

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Abstract

In this article, we describe how instructors in a semester-long study abroad program for U.S.-based undergraduates assess students' intercultural learning using an authentic place-based approach, intercultural mentoring and feedback, and two rubrics. We use one student's assignments as a way to describe our assessment practices. The goal is to encourage study abroad staff and instructors to explore the possibility of adopting and adapting our framework for better alignment between program-level intercultural learning outcome goals and students' learning experiences.

Abstract in Spanish

En este artículo describimos cómo los profesores de un programa de estudio semestral en el extranjero para estudiantes universitarios de grado en los Estados Unidos asesoran el aprendizaje de destrezas y conocimiento intercultural usando un método auténtico, anclado *in situ*, usando mentorías y consejos interculturales, más dos rúbricas. Como ejemplo, usamos las tareas de una estudiante para describir nuestro proceso de asesoramiento a nivel práctico. La meta es animar a los empleados y profesores del estudio en el extranjero a considerar adoptar o reformular nuestro marco pedagógico para mejor

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Date of acceptance: February 17th, 2026

alineamiento entre las metas de aprendizaje a nivel del programa con las experiencias de aprendizaje de los estudiantes.

Keywords

Assessment; intercultural learning; mentoring; rubric; study abroad

1. Introduction

To identify gaps in the literature and encourage readers in the study abroad (SA) sector to address learning outcomes issues, the authors of *Introduction: Recent Research in Assessment in Education Abroad* reviewed a collection of articles previously published by *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* (Acheson et al., 2020). They concluded that “the field of education abroad now needs a clearly delineated set of evidence-based best practices specifically for employing assessment pedagogically. Also necessary are models that education abroad professionals can follow to put principles into practice” (Acheson et al., 2020, p. 5). Subsequently, for the *Special Issue on Assessment as Pedagogy in Education Abroad*, articles solicited were ones that addressed "exemplars of particular instruments that work well for assessment as learning" (Acheson et al., 2021, p. 5), understanding that "assessment as learning" happens when students are involved in reflecting about their assessment results and encouraged to autonomously plan for individualized learning based on those results.

This article aims to contribute to this identified need. Our goal is to illustrate how SA programs can mentor students to develop intercultural competence (IC). To do so, we describe a mentoring system and program-specific rubric we created using backward design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) for a semester-long study abroad program for undergraduate students with advanced Spanish from U.S. universities. Instructors in the program prepare students to conduct ethnographic investigations, and the rubric identifies and measures the behaviors that students display throughout the learning process. Additionally, the use of an adapted version of the Association of American Colleges and Universities' (AAC&U, 2009) *Rubric for Intercultural Knowledge and Competence* at the end of the program indicates that the iteration of these behaviors contributes to IC development. We describe a method that can be used by other SA programs to support individual students in relation to their self-set learning goals. As evidence of student learning, in line with our definition of IC, we present excerpts from a student’s assignments that reveal

cultural differences and similarities that they have reflected upon, propose ways to appropriately deal with them, include the voice of the host society, and identify their own limitations and preconceptions.

The Consortium for Advanced Studies Abroad (CASA)-Sevilla is a research-based education abroad immersion program for U.S. undergraduates in Seville, Spain. Participants come from eight universities that are members of a consortium and must have completed at least five semesters of university Spanish or the equivalent. The program expects that, at the end of the semester, students are able to:

- Develop and implement their own strategies to achieve their own language and intercultural learning goals,
- Interact with and build learning alongside people whose experiences, identities, and perspectives are substantially different from theirs; and
- Go beyond the limits of cultural tourism by sharing spaces and activities with members of the local community.

All students enroll as regular students at the host university, where they attend three classes alongside Spanish and Erasmus students. They also take the mandatory course "Beyond Stereotypes: Encounters with the History, Society, Language and Culture of Seville" at the program Center, which revolves around a master strategy of active pedagogy, engagement in the local community, and a 360-degree mentoring system. The number of participating students varies depending on the semester, but in recent years it has ranged around 10 in the fall and 30 in the spring. The program has three full-time and one part-time staff members, plus part-time professors who coordinate language instruction and teach anthropology and history. There are also two to five part-time intercultural mentors (depending on enrollment).

The CASA-Sevilla program was redesigned using an action research process under the guidance of Goldwin Smith Professor of Anthropology Emeritus Davydd J. Greenwood (Cornell University), and addressed the need to identify the program's desired outcomes, consider the available local resources and context, and plan activities aimed at achieving those goals (Álvarez-Ossorio et al., 2017; Infante Mora et al., 2019; Ivanchikova et al., 2020). Initially, we struggled to define, support, and assess intercultural learning, because it is non-linear and situational, and the learning outcomes include such complex aims as how to be comfortable with ambiguity, cultivate curiosity, and understand one's own assumptions and interpretations as potentially biased in the process of making sense of another cultural milieu. As a brief example of this complexity,

we found that students sometimes demonstrated mastery of a skill or behavior in a certain context but failed to apply the already mastered knowledge or skill in other situations.

This article presents a formative assessment model that education abroad professionals can use as a guide to put principles into practice. Rather than testing a hypothesis, we use a show-and-tell approach to describe how we assess students' intercultural learning through a mentoring system and the use of two rubrics. The first section provides the theoretical framework on which the program's pedagogy is based, and it presents our definition of IC. The second section details the mentoring and formative assessment process. The third section examines a student's ethnographic project carried out during the 2022 Spring semester, with the hope that this example encourages engagement with the model so that others might take advantage of it, adapting it to their local contexts. (The cited material from the student's work and the rubrics have been translated by the authors from Spanish to English.)

1. Theoretical framework

In the process of the redesign, we articulated our commitments to social and active learning to support students' critical thinking, critical reflection, meaning-making, and action (Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1971; Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 1991; Schön, 1983) and continue to affirm them. We found the overviews, theories, and findings described in the Georgetown Report (Vande Berg et al., 2009), Darla Deardorff's work (2006, 2009, 2015), and review of IC-related rubrics and models (AACU, 2009; Bennet, 2015; Byram, 1997; Kozai Group, 2011, 2015) to be both overwhelming and useful for challenging and furthering our thinking. As we struggled to define IC in relation to our program goals and context, we began to determine exactly which kind of experiences and learning supports would lead to observable increased use of intercultural learning behaviors and ability to reflect critically on one's experience.

Darla Deardorff (2006) attempted to find consensus from IC experts on a definition, in part to wrestle with the need to improve assessment practices to measure IC learning. In her study, which in the end did not find consensus, "the top-rated definition was one in which IC was defined as 'the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes' (Deardorff, 2004, p. 194)" (Deardorff, 2006, p. 248). Many of the other definition statements also received 85% or higher agreement in the study and seemed to focus mostly on

communication and behavior (Deardorff, 2006, pp. 247-248). Among the various definitions, we found ourselves most compelled by Byram's (1997) because it includes linguistic competence, which is central in our advanced language skills program. We also found ourselves turning frequently to the AAC&U's (2009) *Rubric on Intercultural Knowledge and Competence*, which employs a definition developed by Janet Bennett (2009), and very similar to Deardorff's (2004, p. 97) definition: "a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts."

After reviewing IC definitions in common use, we settled on our own, and, in our curricular materials, present the following to students:

> Intercultural competence is the set of attitudes, skills, behaviors and knowledge you need to integrate socially (inside and outside your country). Socio-cultural diversity manifests itself in many ways: race/ethnicity, gender, social class, values and ideological commitments, worldviews, religious beliefs and practices, and life rituals. Your ability to appreciate and negotiate diversity is important in your experience abroad as well as at home. You can learn these competencies through regular practice, reflection, research, and communication with others. Learning local contexts, symbols, and meanings will be an everyday challenge for you.

After sharing this definition, we instruct the students in the pedagogy by explaining that intercultural skills can be learned and improved progressively, and that deepening their knowledge of them will not only make their experience abroad richer and more rewarding, but will also better prepare them to navigate a complex, global system.

Our choice to structure a process for receiving meaningful site-based feedback in context around intercultural moments of discomfort and discombobulation stemmed from observational experience and evidence from the Georgetown Report (Vande Berg et al., 2009) that showed that these learning moments are among the best opportunities to learn intercultural skills if students are able to critically reflect on their experiences. Critical reflection has been well theorized as a strategy for learning from experience, for making meaning from the past to guide decision-making in the future, and in our curricular redesign, we created more opportunities to engage in this kind of reflection, in writing and in conversation (Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1971; Kolb, 1984;

Mezirow, 1991; Schön, 1983). However, like others, in practice we found it challenging to settle on specific competencies as more or less important, to value and acknowledge the complexity and interrelatedness of language and culture learning, to develop an assessment and mentoring method that all staff and program partners (such as host families) could engage in, and to scaffold learning effectively (Barkin & Collins, 2023; Bennett, 1993, 2004; Bennett & Bennett, 2004; Cartwright et al., 2021; Gulikers et al., 2021; Shabani et al., 2010; Toyoda, 2018). To help foster social research skills and provide opportunities for critical reflection, we encourage selection of topics for investigation that are related to confusing, puzzling, or disorienting incidents students have experienced rather than popular topics of the day (Engelking, 2018; Ward et al., 2001). In this way, we help lay a foundation for stimulating curiosity and for preparing students unfamiliar with social science research to be more willing to conduct interviews, walk around and participate in local culture, and engage others in their investigations (Koning & Ooi, 2013; Mezirow, 1991).

Jin et al. (2024) demonstrate that students benefit from a structured curriculum, guided reflections and mentoring, and Savicki et al. (2015, p. 125) conclude that "anticipating when and where to intervene with individual students may increase the probability not only that early developmental movement occurs, but also that later delays or plateaus can be addressed." A mentoring-rich educational environment has consistent and sustained benefits for mentees, such as academic achievement, productivity, inclusion and belonging, and networking (Johnson, 2016). Other critical characteristics of mentoring relationships are endurance, reciprocity, emotional support, and a safe environment for exploration (Johnson, Rose et al., 2010). Recent studies conceptualize the role of mentoring networks, or constellations, to recognize anyone who provides developmental assistance (Higgins & Thomas, 2001). Mentors in networks facilitate access to a broader range of information, often resulting in significant personal learning for the mentee (Sorcinelli & Jung, 2007). As we will explain later, our program has created an intercultural mentoring constellation that aims to accompany students to help elucidate the cultural cues in terms of attitudes, knowledge, interpretation, and relation skills; discovery and interaction skills; and critical cultural awareness (Byram et al., 2002; Kolb & Kolb, 2013). Similar pedagogical interventions have been described by Giovanangeli and Allatson (2022), who present a scaffolded research assessment model, supported by academic mentoring, that leads to a final, on-the-ground research project; their study mentions the use of rubrics but does not explain how these instruments support student learning.

2. Assessment as learning: The importance of focusing on behavior

Other SA programs have used behavior-based approaches, such as Situational Judgment Tests (McDaniel & Nguyen, 2001; Weekley & Ployhart, 2006; Whetzel & McDaniel, 20009), to assess the behavioral aspect of IC. Situational Judgement Tests (SJTs) emanate from the tenet of behavioral consistency, i.e., that past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior (Whetzel & McDaniel, 2009). For example, Wesleyan University used the SJT approach to develop an IC scale, "Wesleyan Intercultural Competence Scale" (WICS), to assess the behavioral aspect of IC (Stemler et al., 2014). WICS presents situations that SA students are likely to encounter and different response options designed to reflect the six levels of IC proposed by M. Bennett (1986). Another assessment tool created to help students develop behavioral flexibility in intercultural encounters is the Diary Journaling Tool (Spencer-Oatey & Davidson, 2014), based on the work of Molinsky (2013). The goal is for students to be able to adjust their behavior, as needed, when living, studying, and/or working in culturally unfamiliar contexts.

Unlike WICS and Diary, the CASA-Sevilla program assesses student behavior through academic work (assignments) in the overarching and semester-long course that all program students take during their semester abroad, called "Beyond Stereotypes: Encounters with the History, Society, Language and Culture of Seville." We decided to focus on evaluating students' described behaviors and reflections after their interactions with the host culture; this way, students are less likely to be influenced by preconceived ideas they might have based on their values and beliefs (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Griffith et al., 2016; Whetzel & McDaniel, 2009). Also, a set of articulated behaviors creates a portrait of the student and their accomplishments, frustrations, strengths, and weaknesses in the moment of facing a particular incident, which then allows mentors to respond in a timely manner, to support and encourage the student to keep going. And, in consistently assessing these behaviors over the course of the semester, students are able to better understand themselves as individuals and as subjects who participate actively in the host culture. This approach has various practical advantages: we do not depend on the student's reported self-perception; we do not depend on an ideal endpoint; we can act immediately after a student encounters a dilemma, assessing their behaviors in context; we can take into account factors such as learners' differing preparedness, aptitudes,

and motivations; and we can create plans for progressing on a weekly basis, optimizing the capacity of individuals to improve their learning.

To make this possible, our program decided to (i) create a framework for supporting student behaviors associated with intercultural research and (ii) to create our own formative assessment rubric to document and measure those behaviors. As an evaluation tool, we chose a few of the skills from the AAC&U's (2009) *Intercultural Knowledge and Competence VALUE Rubric* and added a few additional behavioral skills related to conducting research, and with that summative assessment rubric we evaluate learning outcomes at the end of the program's required course.

2.1. Framework for supporting student behaviors associated with intercultural research

To structure a process for receiving meaningful site-based feedback in context, the CASA-Sevilla program developed its own Practical Framework for Supporting Intercultural Mentoring (further described below). Having a framework to assess students' skills at the beginning of the semester and document the competencies acquired thanks to the program's pedagogical design was a priority. At the linguistic level, this was addressed by adapting the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR), but we needed to deploy a structure to achieve this in the IC dimensions. Drawing on the philosophy of the CEFR, we created the *Common Framework for Intercultural Learning* (CFIL), the development of which is detailed in Infante Mora et al., 2019. In brief, the CFIL places the students at the center of the learning process and supports them with exercises in various linguistic, social, and cultural spheres. It facilitates students' self-assessment in each dimension, goal setting, and, in consultation with their mentor, design of specific action plans to achieve their objectives and evaluate the results.

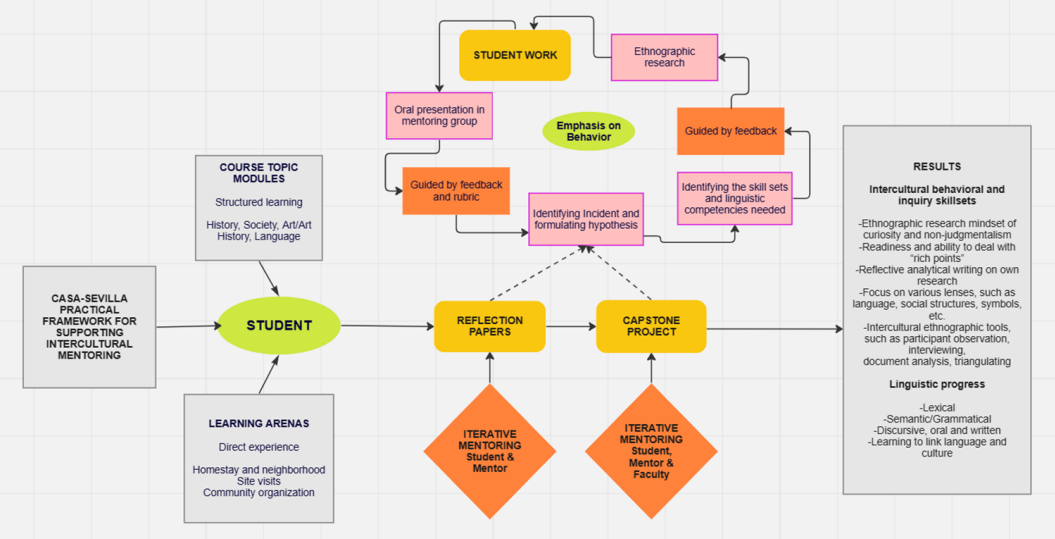
The distinction between professed attitudes and mindset versus achieved behavior is comparable to the language skill assessment. The CEFR does not ask students about grammar theory or phonological principles; it queries them about what they can do with the language, even though those behaviors depend on cognitive structures like grammar patterns. Asking about those patterns is an unreliable and unproductive way of ascertaining a student's applied language skills. In the same way, the CFIL does not ask the students about their attitudes or understanding of cultural differences/similarities. It asks them to demonstrate the behaviors they can and have undertaken. The

actual behavior certainly reflects learned cognitive structures, but we only recognize that inner learning when it is demonstrated in overt practice (for more on espoused theory versus theory-in-use, see Argyris & Schön, 1996; Deardorff, 2006; Griffith et al., 2016).

The theoretical foundation of the CFIL initially clashed with the practical possibilities of implementing it in the program. Numerous staff meetings and consultations with colleagues from Cornell University were needed to transform it into the *Practical Framework for Supporting Intercultural Mentoring*. The main challenges we faced included the limit on contact hours available for this type of learning within the course; the desire to integrate all student experiences and the consequent need to share information from various sources among all teaching team members; and finding a method to centralize the flow of information. Some responses to these challenges included the creation of a private blog, which we use as a learning management system, and supporting assessment rubrics; the appointment of intercultural mentors as central figures; and the integration of structured learning (acquired in cultural modules) and learning arenas (providing experiential learning). The following diagram outlines this pedagogical method and its outcomes.

FIGURE (1)

CASA-SEVILLA PRACTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR SUPPORTING INTERCULTURAL MENTORING (ADAPTED COMMON FRAMEWORK FOR INTERCULTURAL LEARNING)



Source: CASA-Sevilla Practical Framework for Supporting Intercultural Mentoring

Within this framework, all program members (staff, teachers, and tutors) become mentors, each offering guidance to the students in their area of expertise. The silent and often unnoticed mentoring work carried out by the

staff is made visible and valued; the instructors who teach the cultural modules during the first weeks can observe the students' progress throughout the semester and provide feedback when necessary; the Language Coordinator monitors language progress and intervenes to provide support; and the intercultural mentors who lead the weekly mentorship sessions advise and support the students by encouraging them to set their own learning goals and providing feedback and advice about how to accomplish them.

Intercultural mentors for the mentoring sessions are local linguists and philologists with expertise in using rubrics and online learning systems; they are selected to represent diverse lived experiences, generational perspectives, and professional backgrounds. Before beginning their work, they receive program training and read a Mentor's Manual written to guide them. Mentors must be receptive, flexible, and sensitive to the reality of the situation. The mentors' advantage is that they are older—more advanced in their own understanding of what it means to be a cultural being—and are also members of the cultural milieu being studied, while the student/learner is an outsider. The knowledge the mentors have as participants in their culture is perceived as latent wisdom, part of their being. However, our ability to speak about our own culture is also constantly developing. Therefore, the role of the intercultural mentor is to serve as a humble guide who, by simply being and asking strategic questions, demonstrates what it means to be an individual with multiple social identities within a more complex system (Fletcher & Ragins, 2007; Ketcham et al., 2018; Vandermaas-Peeler & Moore, 2023). The Mentor's Manual includes reflective practices that help mentors gain self-understanding and refine their role before undertaking their task.

Weekly mentorship sessions consist of meetings with a small group of students in which mentees identify personal goals related to the academic aspects of the "Beyond Stereotypes" course (History, Society, Art, Language and its relation to Culture) and the various experiential learning contexts organized by the program (city explorations, host family, and the community organization where they engage in service-learning). The goals revolve around aspects of the host culture that they are interested in understanding better. Once these goals are identified, students discuss with mentors the strategies they will use to investigate them, and from there, they have a week to produce results. Mentorships ensure that all of their experiences abroad contribute to their learning of the local culture.

The program defines intercultural research as a process that begins with the identification of a "critical incident," an observation of something (a behavior, a place) that arouses curiosity, seems incomprehensible or perplexing, or evokes personal resonances (Engelking, 2018). To make sense of these observations, students must develop tentative interpretations and then discover meaningful ways to gather data (behavioral, observational, historical, material). This involves learning and choosing appropriate research methods, such as participant observation, interviews, surveys, or document analysis. Subsequently, students must deploy these methods and collect, organize, and analyze data to determine which of the tentative lines of interpretation seem promising and which do not. It is an iterative process. From there, students develop their own interpretation and then design a strategy to communicate the results of this research clearly and persuasively to an audience that has not directly experienced this investigative journey. This research process and set of methods are introduced early in the semester, with multiple opportunities for practice. For the assignment to be educational, mentors must problematize the incidents chosen by the students. They guide them by filtering out irrelevant aspects, making the tasks more concrete, proposing challenges, and allowing the students to make decisions about which paths to take and what means to use to reach their destination (Wass & Golding, 2014).

In this method, content matters less than process, and the mentor's role is key. The mentor suggests additional sources of information and references and raises doubts and questions during the mentoring session. It is common for students to be eager to present conclusions, and at this moment the mentor might question some of the students' assumptions and open new doors in the research. The student will learn to tolerate the ambiguity of not knowing where their inquiries are heading and not following a straight line in their argumentation, and will be continuously encouraged to seek alternative explanations to the incidents they have identified. As a result of the mentoring, students will learn to ask themselves questions and challenge quick solutions and to tolerate the possibility of never reaching a conclusive end.

2.2. Rubric of behaviors associated with intercultural research

After rubric shopping (Barkin & Collins, 2023), a common practice among SA faculty, professionals, and administrators, we eventually landed on the idea that we wanted to create our own rubric to communicate the learning and assessment expectations clearly to students and to align to our context and aims. The Rubric of Behaviors Associated with Intercultural Research was created

through an action-research process at a time when the program recognized the need to help students reflect on their learning and encourage them to autonomously plan for individualized learning. It was a collaborative project between CASA-Sevilla and the Center for Teaching Innovation at Cornell University. Its creation went through different stages until it became the formative instrument we use today. The first pilot of the rubric (See Table 1) was a template that each instructor adapted to their specific module content, creating a progressive order of difficulty. This first rubric followed the CEFR language skills assessment model, and was based on "I can" statements.

TABLE (1)
FIRST PILOT OF THE RUBRIC

Use this rubric to assess your competencies in the interpretation of art:
0 - I cannot do. 1 - I can minimally do. 2 - I can do fairly well. 3 - I am an expert

	0	1	2	3
I can describe a work of art, monument or building in its surrounding environment, from an iconographic perspective				
I can read a work of art, monument or building using the methods I have learned, from an iconological perspective				
I can place a work of art, monument or building in time, taking into account its physiognomy, meaning, and historical context				
I can identify, analyze, and compare artistic examples from other cultures				
I can express my own opinions about art and I am able to discuss them with my friends or with my host family				
I can carry out my own academic research using the techniques and tools explained in the course				

At the end of the module, instructors and students filled out the rubric, assessment and self-assessment results were compared, and instructors advised students on their next steps. From there, each student defined their next goals, which they could achieve thanks to the course assignments.

Immediately after this first attempt, we realized the failure of this assessment method, due to several causes: the rubric did not establish a clear sequence of difficulty and therefore hindered mentoring; since each weekly rubric focused on a specific subject content, it made iterative practice difficult; and students found the rubric concepts confusing and did not know how to

create goals that would help them progress based on their results. We understood that the adaptation of the CEFR method was not appropriate and that mentors needed a new rubric that was consistent and actionable. To create it, we used backward design (see Table 2) (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). We had evidence that the iteration of behaviors associated with intercultural research produced intercultural learning, as assessed by the adaptation of the AACU rubric at the end of the semester. Therefore, we made an exhaustive list of demonstrated examples of learning outcomes, collected from student capstone projects in previous years (See Table 2, STEP 1, for an example); for each behavior we described how students could show evidence in their course assignments (STEP 2); then, based on these observable behaviors, we identified the behavioral skills the student had displayed (STEP 3); finally, we classified the behaviors into the appropriate stage of the investigation (STEP 4).

TABLE (2)
STEPS OF RUBRIC BACKWARD DESIGN

STEP 1 ► **DEMONSTRATED LEARNING OUTCOME**	**STEP 2 ►** **How can the student show evidence?**	**STEP 3 ►** **SKILLS APPLIED** **Students must be able to:**	**STEP 4** **RESEARCH STAGE**
"In the three supermarkets that are closest to my apartment there are many signs of their marketing or their sales. They have a lot of space, but with many aisles of products and meals. Instead of a counter, there are some boxes. Another interesting observation about supermarkets is the behavior of buyers: they are very independent while looking for these things, and unless they go to buy meat or bread, they usually do not need or expect help until the time to pay. Usually, employees only help buyers when asked. The main exception is when paying. There are a multitude of boxes and ATMs to make the experience seem more efficient and faster."	• Documenting behaviors, rituals, social roles, group structures, symbols and worldviews • Observing linguistic and corporeal information as well as the material environment • Showing a distinction between observation (description), interpretation (thinking about the causes), and analysis	• Observe	DATA SEARCH AND PROCESSING

When we finished classifying this comprehensive record of behaviors, we shaped our rubric adding the values that were going to measure them: fully displayed (3 points); observable to some extent (2 points); absent (1 point). However, unlike other rubrics, the expectation is not that the student displays all behaviors in every investigation they undertake. There is no perfect ideal in this assessment method. The complexity of the chosen incident is considered, and thus, we added an additional section: Research Complexity. Evaluating this aspect, mentors acknowledge that the context can determine behaviors, as facing a common incident will not be the same as addressing a social taboo, and seeking information in a close social circle (the student's comfort zone) will not be the same as interacting with experts or directly affected individuals.

Mentors fill out the rubric after each intercultural research project, share it with their students on the blog, and discuss next steps at the next weekly meeting. In this way, it is possible to assess whether the student has improved in some of these behaviors beyond their subjective statements, and verifiable examples of learning are obtained that we can show the student and share with the other instructors. Grades are not attached to this rubric, but students are graded based on their developmental growth over the course, as reflected in the graphs associated with the rubric.

Initially, the rubric was used to generate a snapshot of individual behavioral skills at a particular point during the semester. Later on, we began to compare snapshots at different moments to understand how the students were progressing and what we could do to support them. In addition to assessing students on an individual basis, we also compile data to analyze group learning and to better understand the program's functioning. Finally, we use this data to compare semesters. For instance, after the pandemic, we compared the learning outcomes achieved in the springs of 2019 and 2020 and obtained valuable information to determine if remote research produced a different type of learning and what aspects of the program should be reinforced if we needed to transition to a remote teaching format again.

This section focused on the program's mentoring and formative assessment process. The next section will describe our assessment-as-pedagogy system step by step, using the example of one student's work from the spring of 2022 (alias Maria). Although the student's personal details are not revealed, we obtained written consent to use excerpts from their research projects. This case study was selected because they chose to investigate a particular historical incident at the beginning of the semester and afterwards deepen their

understanding of the same through their capstone project. This example allows us to illustrate the mentors' interventions and the student's evolution throughout the semester. In this particular example the mentors were the history teacher (Mentor A), since the research we describe focused on historical aspects, and the mentor who led Maria's intercultural mentoring group where they discussed and presented their research projects (Mentor B).

3. An examination of a student's project

After a class session in the Beyond Stereotypes course module, "Understanding History and the Impact of the Past on the Present," following a heated debate on historical memory where students and instructor clash due to their different perspectives, Maria states:

> After the history module in which we talked about historical memory in Spain and compared the act of remembering the bad things of the past between the United States and Spain, I decided to investigate Pico Reja, the mass grave in Seville.

The incident Maria refers to occurs when Mentor A, a historian, discusses the differences between history and historical memory, expressing his opinion on the complementary, not substitutive, role that memory should play. According to him, memory is part of individual and collective subjectivity, whereas history is a science based on evidence. Historical memory can help fill the gaps that history cannot document, give voice to those who were voiceless, but it should not replace established facts. The debate intensifies when the removal of symbols from the past is discussed, along with the alternatives to such acts of cancellation. Maria, who had actively participated in the removal of a statue of Columbus in their hometown Richmond (Virginia), feels personally implicated. From there, they decide to investigate the local perspective on historical memory, focusing on the recent opening of a mass grave containing victims of the Francoist dictatorship (1939-1975) in the city of Seville (Pico Reja) and the opinions that this event elicits from the local population.

The debate on historical memory in Spain sparks deep and ongoing controversy in local society, as it highlights the diversity of interpretations regarding the recent past of the Spanish Civil War and the Francoist dictatorship. The controversy began in 2007, following two moments: the passage of the Historical Memory Law, which recognized the victims of Francoism; and the process, slow but inexorable, of questioning the political transition, specifically

the Amnesty Law, which left numerous war crimes and repression by the dictator untried. To broaden its scope, a new Democratic Memory Law was passed in 2011, which established state responsibility in the respectful search and exhumation of missing victims and creation of an archive of documented findings. Both laws faced rejection from a significant portion of the population that deemed them divisive, which revealed a lack of consensus on how to interpret the past. In 2017, within this new legal framework, excavation and identification of the bodies buried in the mass grave Pico Reja began in Seville. Currently, the bodies of 1,800 victims have been located, making it the largest exhumed mass grave in Spain and one of the largest in Western Europe.

Once the incident has been identified, in the individual mentorship session Maria and Mentor B agree that the student will engage in conversations with their local acquaintances on the topic of historical memory and will compare the information gathered with Spanish references (students use the Dialnet and PARES bibliographical databases to access extensive collections of articles and books in Spanish, the websites of official institutions, and specialized libraries and local documentation centers).

After interviewing some young Sevillians, Maria remarks:

> When asking a local friend about her opinions regarding the Amnesty law and the Pact of Forgetting, I realized that this topic is taboo for Spaniards (...) those questions that I had asked her cannot be asked of anyone on the street.

In these conversations, Maria discovers unexpected information that they must process and explain:

> When I interviewed the young people on the street, most of them did not know much about the mass grave or about the controversy associated with historical memory (...) One of them explained that it is unfortunate that the matter of studying and investigating the past is considered dangerous and sometimes almost “anti-Spanish.”

They also gather information from some official websites, such as the City Council of Seville. From all this, Maria concludes that:

> The length of time between the use of the mass grave and the act of exhuming makes sense when one considers the history and politics of the years after Franco's death (...) For me, this incredible gap of time shows the true nature of this controversy.

In this early approach to the incident, Maria finishes the essay with a strong personal opinion:

> The past is painful and terrifying, which is represented through the bones of the victims one on top of the other in Pico Reja (...) In my opinion, there cannot be a true democracy in Spain until everyone is held accountable for their actions or until justice is achieved for all the victims of Francoism.

Once the task is completed, the support system begins. First, Mentor A shares two basic pieces of advice related to the methodology:

- You have used enough digital sources, but you have not used enough bibliographic sources
- You should incorporate more interviews with older individuals
- Afterwards, Mentor B shares with Maria the rubric of behaviors associated with this research, highlighting that they have demonstrated these sophisticated behaviors:
- They have not withdrawn in the face of the discomfort with the topic
- They have observed a social taboo and have taken risks in confronting it

Other behaviors are observable but could be strengthened in future projects:

- Deepen their observation of the social environment to incorporate more perspectives
- Observe the impact that the debate on historical memory has on the local society
- Understand why the topic is relevant to their experience in Seville.

Finally, Mentor B points out some behaviors that were not evident in this assignment and that Maria could attempt in future projects to:

- Link the topic to personal interests or previous experiences and use them as a framework for analysis
- Analyze the topic in all its dimensions (political, social, historical, philosophical, linguistic, etc.)
- Formulate questions at each step of the research

After this initial assignment with the history topic, the method is systematically repeated throughout the semester. In each of the weekly investigations, Maria must identify an incident before the mentorship session; discuss a specific research plan with Mentor B, including the tools and local

resources they can use; upload the research findings to the blog; and present them to their mentorship group. Once done, they will receive feedback from the subject specialist and rubrics from Mentor B to help them understand their performance and identify behaviors they can continue to reinforce.

The course capstone project occurs during the second half of the semester. This assignment follows the same methodology used in the previous projects but delves more deeply into data collection and intercultural analysis. For the capstone, Maria must write an essay of 4,000 to 5,000 words, explaining their efforts to understand an element of Sevillian culture. They must work with a wide variety of Spanish sources, conduct at least two well-prepared interviews with Sevillian experts on the subject, and analyze and present the information in a way that can engage their mentoring peers. The assignment is carried out in various stages: a proposal (week 7); a first draft (week 11); a second draft (week 14), and a final version. Both Mentor A and Mentor B support the student throughout the entire process.

For their capstone project, Maria decides to deepen their understanding of the historical memory incident from a comparative perspective:

> Investigate the Pico Reja mass grave as an example of historical memory in Seville and compare it with Confederate monuments in the US (...) As I am from Richmond, Virginia, which used to be the capital of the Confederacy during the American Civil War, I have first-hand experience in terms of the collective and historical memory regarding slavery and the history of systemic oppression that continues to exist in my country.

The first version builds upon some ideas that were already present in the first essay on local history:

> For me, the effect of historical memory is clearly noticeable in the large time gap between the use of the mass grave and the act of exhuming. This long duration of time is explained because the Amnesty Law was approved after Franco's death to facilitate the transition to democracy.

And, they reiterate that:

> Historical memory helps to form national narratives about why certain events happen and how present and future problems should be solved. The act of “remembering” is important because multiple parts of the story have been silenced and forgotten due to shame. We must listen to

> different perspectives in order to understand the experiences of other "players" in the story.

But now, Maria adds the comparative component:

> As Americans grapple with the legacy of slavery and systemic racism, monuments and memorials commemorating the Confederacy have become political focal points. The removals have been prompted because the monuments express and reinforce white supremacy, acknowledge a treasonous government whose purpose was the perpetuation and expansion of slavery, and that the presence of Confederate monuments continues to disenfranchise and alienate Black people in the United States.

Maria proposes to reveal how the controversy about Pico Reja illustrates the complexities of historical memory in Spain. To obtain data, they plan to interview archeologists at Pico Reja and employees of the Historical Memory Office at the City Council of Seville. After reading the first draft, Mentor A comments:

> It's a great idea to establish a comparison between two events or historical realities currently under scrutiny. However, it carries the risk of drawing incorrect parallels. It is important to consider that these are two different countries and historical periods, with all that implies, and that the consequences they have in the present are different.
>
> When conducting the interviews, I advise you to be respectful towards individuals and organizations that oppose the objectives of historical memory in Spain.

By introducing a comparative approach, Maria brings a new dimension to their critical reflection, one related to their own experience in their native culture. This adds richness to the analysis, but also carries the risk of judging the local reality with preconceived ideas. Mentor A points out this risk and recommends that Maria broaden the scope of their primary sources to include different opinions.

The second draft addresses this advice, although the analysis still lacks depth. The introduction is expanded to incorporate personal experience and provides additional information about the Spanish and American historical contexts. In the Spanish context, after interviewing various local students and their host mother, Maria emphasizes:

> Unlike the controversial Confederate monuments, about which the majority of the American population knows, I found that the majority of Spaniards, especially those under 40 years of age, did not even know that a mass grave of the Civil War and Franco's dictatorship existed in their own city (...) Pico Reja remains largely unknown and the topics of the Civil War, Franco's dictatorship and the Transition to Democracy almost never come into conversation unless the discussion is academic or intellectual.

This observation, once again, poses a crucial question: why historical memory, and by extension, the removal of symbols from the past, is not a priority for a portion of Spanish society. Maria has not yet addressed this issue, and the intercultural analysis relies on similarities:

> After analyzing the historical-political context of the two countries, even though the circumstances were different, there are similarities that are difficult to ignore. The exhumation of Pico Reja and the elimination of the Confederate monuments, two actions that have been controversial, represent the preservation of historical memory (...) In addition, in the same way that the exhumation of Pico Reja serves to give voice and justice to the victims and their families, so does the removal of Confederate monuments. Both acts are necessary steps to achieve justice and a true democracy.

Halfway through the project, the second draft lays the groundwork for a more refined analysis in the final version. Maria gathers information from several relevant interviews with individuals of different ages (including some older individuals who remember the events of the transition from dictatorship to democracy in Spain) and with a historian from the Documentary Center of Historical Memory in Salamanca. This expert will be crucial in the argumentative shift that they incorporate in the final version of the essay:

> Regarding the mission of the Documentation Center, the historian explained that the objective is to make available to society information on the conservation and dissemination of the historical memory of the shared Spanish past (...) He said that, similar to this Documentation Center and Archive, the exhumation of Pico Reja represents another way of educating the Spanish citizenry about their past, giving voice to the victims of Francoism who cannot speak for themselves, and achieving justice for the families.

With more information at their disposal and additional time to critically reflect on the topic, the final version is a clear example of evolution in research behaviors. To begin with, it highlights the controversy surrounding the removal of Confederate monuments in their own country:

> Ultimately, there is controversy over the removal of the Confederate monuments because there continues to be a persistent debate about the purpose and value of the Confederacy during the American Civil War (…) Questions began to arise about what the monuments represented - the memorialization of lives lost during the war, massive resistance to integration and civil rights claims, or a public representation of hierarchical racist belief systems? (…) These questions opened up a debate on this political flashpoint, with some demanding their removal as symbols of racial oppression and others warning of an attempt to "erase" history and heritage.

These ideas contrast with the words of the historian from the Documentation Center in Salamanca, who is opposed to the removal of symbols that can serve a social function:

> The documents that are now presented in the Archive of the Spanish Civil War and the Documentation Center in general are some of the same documents that were used by the authorities of the Franco regime to control and repress many Spaniards.

With this in mind, Maria reflects:

> The proliferation of complex and nuanced discussions about the meaning of monuments is slowly shifting our collective memory to frame monuments as a physical representation of our racialized society, but at a frustratingly slow pace. I think the best solutions are those that empower local Black activists and community members to decide what to do with the monuments (…) After visiting the museum in Salamanca I realized that such a model can serve as a solution in both cases. The museum is a perfect example of the preservation of historical memory that also acts as a way of educating the population.
>
> I cannot say what I think should be done with the monuments; ideally, I would like to see each individual locality forced to confront the meaning and importance of its public monuments and consider how to move forward (…) If the Black community chooses to follow the model of the

> Salamanca museum, I think that would be effective as well (...) I think it would be an incredible opportunity to educate people and give a voice to a segment of the population that has historically been silenced by the white majority. In the same way that the Salamanca museum recognizes the tragic history of the Franco era, I think that the museum with the Confederate monuments could recognize the controversial figures of the past without glorifying them.

It is worth highlighting this balanced, reflective conclusion that incorporates both points of view (the American and the Spanish) and is even more noteworthy coming from someone who participated in the removal of the Columbus statue in their hometown. Mentor A's final comments are:

> Excellent: mature, balanced, and comprehensive.
>
> Your visit to Salamanca has finally given you the right perspective: that all versions or interpretations of the same historical fact or event must be taken into account, even though you may believe (probably justifiably) that "yours" is the correct and fair one. Above all, congratulations because you have understood that one of the objectives of History (and Historical Memory) could very well be the education of the people so that, as in both cases you present, it never happens again.
>
> In conclusion, reading your work has been truly fascinating.

As this example illustrates, the goal of the Capstone Project is to master the research method and refine behaviors during the research process. Maria addresses a complex topic, observes the context, provides data collected in their interactions, and ventures into an analysis that can be considered more or less accurate, but through which they manage to develop their prior ideas with the new perspective learned. It should also be made clear that only some kinds of instructors can appreciate this kind of work and mentoring in this dynamic way.

From the rubric ratings, we create a column chart to visualize observed behavior for each research stage for every assignment. As mentioned previously, the research stages include Creating Groundwork, Data Search and Processing, Analyzing and Interpreting Data, Presentation, and Complexity. Maria's assessment data show the end result of the process in each of the stages, with optimal values in most of the research behaviors.

FIGURE (2)

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT RUBRIC RESULTS: CREATING GROUNDWORK

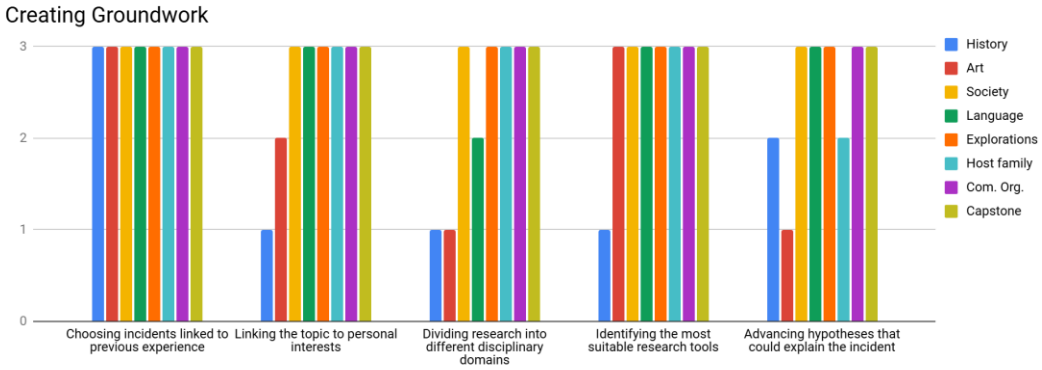
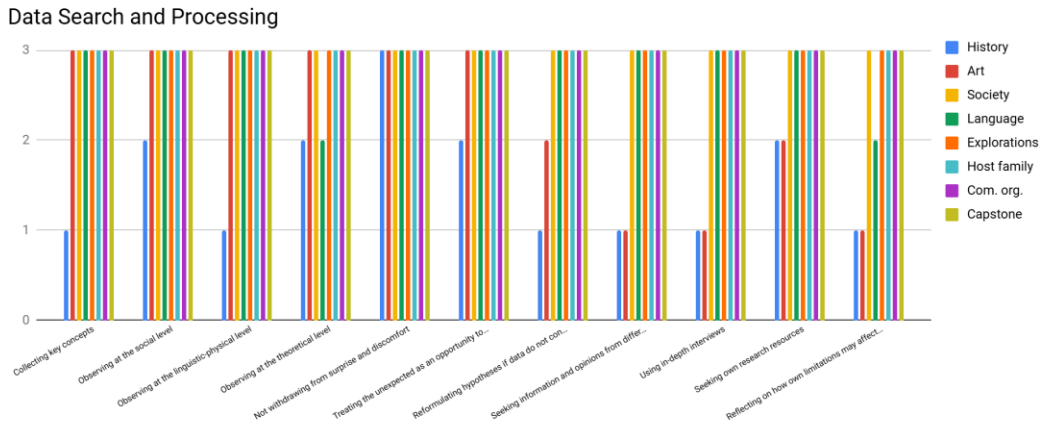


FIGURE (3)

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT RUBRIC RESULTS: DATA SEARCH AND PROCESSING



(Data Search and Processing column titles, for readability: Behavior 1: collecting key concepts; Behavior 2: observing at the social level; Behavior 3: observing at the linguistic-physical level; Behavior 4: observing at the theoretical level; Behavior 5: not withdrawing from surprise and discomfort; Behavior 6: treating the unexpected as an opportunity to learn; Behavior 7: reformulating hypotheses if data do not confirm them; Behavior 8: seeking information and opinions from different people; Behavior 9: using in-depth interviews; Behavior 10: seeking own research resources; Behavior 11: reflecting on how own limitations may affect research.)

FIGURE (4)

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT RUBRIC RESULTS: ANALYZING AND INTERPRETING DATA

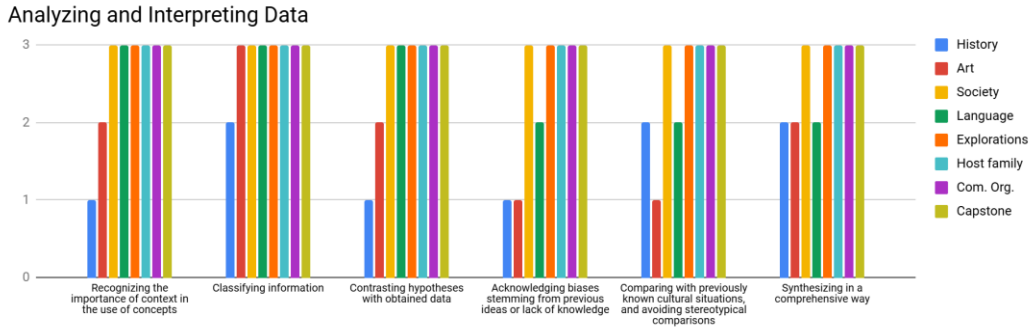


FIGURE (5)

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT RUBRIC RESULTS: PRESENTATION

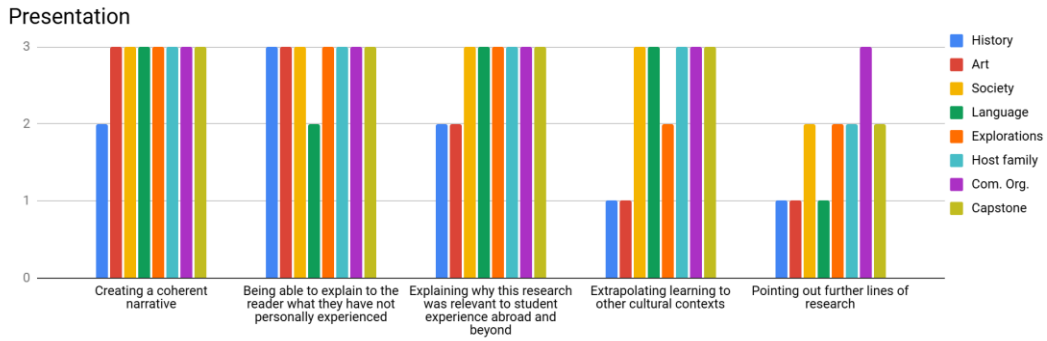
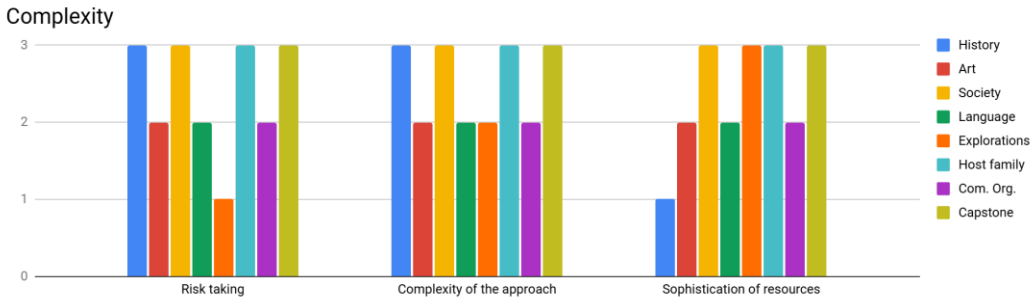


FIGURE (6)

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT RUBRIC RESULTS: COMPLEXITY



In addition to the formative assessment described above, for the summative assessment at the end of the semester, here we illustrate how we use the CASA-Sevilla Intercultural Learning Rubric to evaluate and confirm that the repeated behaviors, supported by instructor and mentor throughout the semester, result in advanced cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral skills. Again, with excerpts from Maria's work, we illustrate how we interpret their

achievement in relation to seven learning outcomes: intercultural ethnographic mindset, cultural self-awareness, reflective analytical writing, knowledge of cultural worldview frameworks, empathy, readiness and ability to deal with "rich points", and openness. Achievement in relation to each of these learning outcomes is elaborated below.

First, in terms of intercultural ethnographic mindset and cultural self-awareness, Maria is able to (i) question their own conclusions and pose them as hypotheses rather than answers, (ii) be suspicious of easy interpretations, and (iii) practice coming up with more than one interpretation as a way to test their ideas:

> I cannot say what should be done with the monuments. Ideally, I would like to see each individual locality forced to confront the meaning and importance of its public monuments and consider how to move forward (…) I think it would be an incredible opportunity to educate people and give voice to a segment of the population that has historically been silenced.

Maria is able to articulate insights into their own cultural rules and biases, reflecting on how their own cultural background influences their interpretations of the new context:

> At the beginning of the « Beyond Stereotypes » course we had a brief introduction to the history of Spain. During that class, we talked about the issue of historical memory, the Pact of Forgetting, and the transition to democracy in Spain. It seemed evident to all Americans that the events of the past, no matter how painful, must be remembered so that all sectors of the population, especially those who have been negatively impacted by the past, feel included in the present.

Maria is able to identify personal previous ideas that do not correspond with the observed and experienced reality:

> Since historical memory is defined as the way in which groups of people create and then identify with specific narratives about historical periods or events, it is evident that there are problems of certain biases and partialities because humans, in and of themselves, are subjective beings.

Second, in terms of reflective analytical writing, Maria is able to articulate their own experiences and how they might relate to others' experiences:

> The proliferation of complex and nuanced discussions about the meaning of monuments is slowly shifting our collective memory to frame monuments as a physical representation of our racialized society, but at a frustratingly slow pace (...) The situation of the removal of Confederate monuments reminds me a lot of the exhumation of the Pico Reja mass grave and that is why I have chosen to analyze and compare these two circumstances.

Third, in terms of knowledge of cultural worldview frameworks, Maria is able to demonstrate sophisticated understanding of the complexity of the host culture, formulating hypothesis to explain the situation and generating alternative interpretations:

> The work of exhuming Pico Reja only began almost 80 years after having left the bodies of those victims to rot in the ground (...) This long duration of time is explained because the Amnesty Law was approved after Franco's death to facilitate the transition to democracy (...) Without this law existing, it is conceivable that today's Spain would not be the democracy we all know.

Fourth, in terms of empathy, Maria is able to interpret intercultural experience from the perspectives of their own and more than one worldview and demonstrate ability to act in a supportive manner that recognizes the feelings of another cultural group:

> It was not until my visit to Pico Reja that I realized the impact and importance of the exhumation work. Seeing millions of bones, skeletons on top of each other, lying in a completely inhuman and brutal way, I cried. I couldn't believe the conditions of these victims.

Fifth, in terms of readiness and ability to deal with “rich points”, Maria is able to ask complex questions about the host culture:

> What happens when we talk about the Franco dictatorship or the Civil War?” “Do you have an opinion on the exhumation of Pico Reja?” “Do you think the government should finance the exhumation?

Maria is able to seek out and articulate answers to these questions that reflect multiple cultural perspectives:

> When interviewing some Spanish classmates at the University of Seville, I realized that most Spaniards do not have a great knowledge of

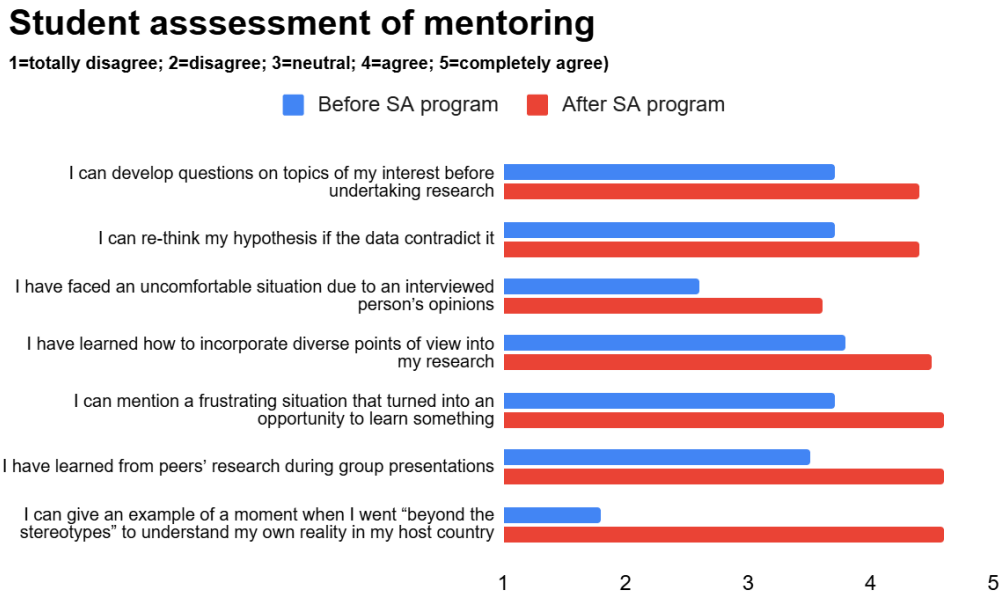
> historical memory or the Pico Reja mass grave. Of the four students I spoke with, all explained that they learned about the Civil War and the dictatorship in high school. However, three of the four said it wasn't until college classes and their involvement in social activism that they began to understand the impact of that time on today. Two students clarified that the increase in participation in the Black Lives Matter movement, after the murder of George Floyd, was the incentive to investigate more deeply the problems with Spanish history (...) On the other hand, another student explained to me that he does not support historical memory. He said the events of the dictatorship are old and few people who were impacted by it want to talk about this part of their past. Furthermore, this student suggested that there are other current problems - such as housing prices for students and the control of irregular immigration - that deserve more attention.

Sixth, in terms of openness, Maria is able to initiate and develop interactions with culturally different others:

> From this class onwards I felt so obsessed with historical memory that I began to watch documentaries, talk to professors at the College of Geography and History at the University, and discuss the matter with my classmates (...) Furthermore, I went to the Pico Reja mass grave in Seville to observe the work being done there and interviewed the archaeologists there. Finally, to complement all my research, I traveled to Salamanca to visit the Documentary Center of Historical Memory and speak with the historian there.

In this section we focus on a single student to be able to illustrate the mentoring process and the use of the rubrics. However, in addition to the way we assess individuals' intercultural learning, the program has an ongoing formative evaluation system to guide decision-making and curricular improvements over time. For example, we conduct surveys at the end of each semester, where students can reflect on the impact of the various course components (cultural modules, intercultural mentoring, and experiential learning) on their learning, by quantifying on a 1-5 scale what they could do before their SA experience compared to the end of the program. These surveys also provide open response opportunities for the students to offer feedback and recommendations for improvement. The following column chart reveals the results of 107 of those surveys, submitted between 2021 and 2025, to the specific question about mentoring:

FIGURE (7)
STUDENT ASSESSMENT OF MENTORING SYSTEM



Looking at this column chart created from students' responses to our mentoring system the program staff is able to develop a broader context view of how the mentoring system has worked between 2021-2025 based on their pre-post reflections. We expect that continuing to collect reflections from students in the future will provide a multifaceted understanding of growth during study abroad.

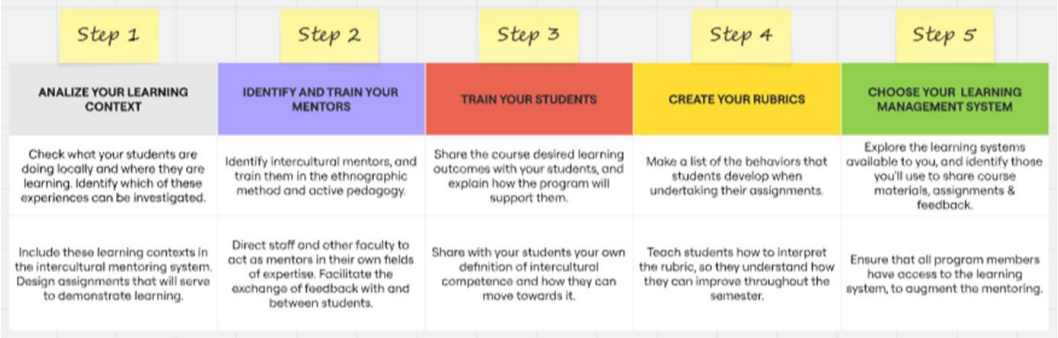
4. Conclusion

This article is a practitioner-focused discussion on how study abroad programs can mentor students to develop intercultural competence. It showcases an "assessment as learning" method based on structured mentoring and the use of a rubric.

Using a student example, we walked readers through the process, illustrating how we provide opportunities for students to practice research behaviors through the refinement of ethnographic skills, the development of contextualized research topics, and a structure of iterative practices focused on a broader individual project that demonstrates many of these skills. We chose to feature this example, because it helps us to clearly explain how our feedback and assessment process works in relation to our targeted learning outcomes.

For this style of mentoring to be generalizable to other education abroad programs and faculty, we believe the following steps are necessary:

FIGURE (8)
STEPS TO REPLICATE THE METHOD



Source : Steps to Replicate the Method

Many study abroad institutions rely on pre/post surveys, standard instruments, and self-reported Likert items, that do not completely capture students' behavioral aspects, learning and development (Deardorff, 2015; Griffith, et al. 2016). Some of these paid tools exclude less favored communities from the possibility of carrying out learning assessment (Barkin & Collins, 2023). Furthermore, globally marketed intercultural skills assessment systems overly standardize the evaluation experience (M. Bennett, 2009). In order to decentralize assessment, this article encourages study abroad teachers and program administrators to explore the possibility of using open access rubrics and/or creating their own rubrics tailored to their specific contexts and learning outcomes, or to draw inspiration from already existing rubrics (such as ours). The time investment required to align these tools with program goals and activities is worthwhile, as it results in greater curricular coherence, increased control over the learning process, and a genuine opportunity to assess what works and what could be improved.

We would like to conclude this article by providing some insights from our intercultural mentors. Asked about the advantages and disadvantages of our pedagogy, they say:

> Mentorships are a brave space where students can ask the most "obvious" questions they can think of without fear of sounding awkward. And if they don't have any questions, they are also a good place where mentors can present them with situations they've never considered before. We use these moments to compare with familiar situations in

> their home culture, not to change their minds, but to introduce them to other perspectives and cultural situations they might never have been exposed to if they hadn't left the United States.
>
> However, their success depends on the students' engagement:
>
> If they come to the program intending to put less effort into their study abroad experience, mentorships don't mean much to them. In these cases, it's more of a burden, with a series of deadlines they must meet and a series of assignments to complete in order to pass the course. However, for those students who seek more than just pleasure and fun, mentoring sessions play an important role because they help them delve deeper into the local culture's reality in every sense and allow them to see beyond the preconceived ideas they bring from home.

Regarding the effectiveness of the use of the rubric, mentors admit some limitations:

> The difficulties with the rubric aren't so much filling it out, but rather getting students to truly understand it—how they can use it to meet the course goals. Explaining this still presents a challenge for me as a mentor.
>
> And from another:
>
> The difficulty with the rubric lies in the fact that the items do not always match what the students have submitted, and it can be complicated to complete.
>
> Sometimes I wonder if students review the rubric for the benefit of acquiring new skills or because they need a high grade for their home university.

But they also recognize that it is a valuable tool for monitoring learning and progress:

> Mid-semester, I assess the progression of behaviors based on the rubric and then point out where students have room for improvement. Typically, at this point in the semester, almost everyone needs to interact with a wider range of people and improve their ethnographic skills. This is a good time to warn them because they will soon begin their capstone project and will need an advanced mastery of these skills. Most students take my recommendations seriously and use them to keep improving.

Like any action research project, the CASA-Sevilla program is a work in progress. Comments from all local stakeholders help us identify strengths and weaknesses and bring about ongoing adjustments in the pedagogical design. As a result of the feedback and reflection process, our assessment-as-learning method has undergone improvements and will continue evolving while adjusting to changing circumstances and student populations.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Professor Davydd J. Greenwood (Cornell University) for his mentorship during the action research process for the redesign of our language and culture curriculum and program overall. Some of our central ideas and processes emerged from his knowledge base and approach, including a focus on ethnographic mindset and a cyclical practice of formative and summative evaluation. Thanks also to the CASA-Sevilla instructors, staff, and students, who participate actively in our evaluation process.

Ethical approval

The student's work included in this manuscript was used with the student's explicit written permission. The authors did not seek IRB review.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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